



National Institute of Statistical Sciences
PO Box 14006, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-4006
Tel: 919.685.9300 FAX: 919.685.9310
www.niss.org

NISS/ESSI Task Force on Participation Rates in International Assessments

Interim Recommendations

October 11, 2004

1 Background and Summary

This document contains interim recommendations of the NISS/ESSI Task Force on Participation Rates in International Assessments (hereafter, “the Task Force”). The Task Force was convened by the National Institute of Statistical Sciences (NISS) at the request of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and has been assisted and supported by the Education Statistics Services Institute (ESSI).

A list of Task Force members appears in Appendix A, and the charge to the Task Force is included as Appendix B.

The Task Force has met twice, on June 17–18, 2004 and October 1, 2004, both times in Washington, DC. These recommendations were drafted by the Task Force at the latter meeting, at which not all Task Force members were present, but have been reviewed and discussed by all Task Force members.

2 Interim Recommendations

Two “findings” frame the recommendations of the Task Force:

- On the basis of presentations from NCES personnel, the Task Force is convinced that in the absence of action, response rates for PIRLS, PISA and TIMSS will continue to decline, perhaps precipitously. Among forces driving this decline are generally increasing testing burdens, an increase in district-level decisions not to participate, and disinclination of schools to participate in non-mandatory assessments. Possible need for express parental consent for participation in PISA may be a fatal blow.
- The school-level “sell” of PIRLS, PISA and TIMSS, which seems to consist primarily of “do the right thing for the good of the country,” is weak, possibly irretrievably.

The Task Force’s interim recommendations focus on the planned administrations of PIRLS and PISA in 2006. They appear, roughly, in order to decreasing importance.

1. We recommend strongly that PISA be administered in the fall rather than the spring of 2006. We believe that doing this would increase appreciably the likelihood of acceptable school-level response rates.¹
2. We recommend that schools selected for participation in PIRLS and PISA (and, by implication, TIMSS) be selected and notified *at least one year in advance*. This would facilitate scheduling, and attenuate non-response on the grounds that “it is too late to act.”
3. We recommend that schools selected for participation in PIRLS, PISA and TIMSS be approached directly. State officials should receive a “heads-up” letter stating that schools in their states are being approached. District officials should receive a letter stating that a school (or schools) in their districts has been selected, and is to be approached, with a request to notify NCES if this is a problem.²
4. Based on reports of the effectiveness of the strong “personal contact” component of recruiting schools for NAEP, the Task Force recommends that PIRLS, PISA and TIMSS place equal emphasis on personal contact.
5. We recommend vigorous, personal-contact-oriented non-response follow-up.

There is one recommendation specific to the spring 2005 field tests for PIRLS and PISA.

1. The Task Force recommends incorporation of follow-up interviews of schools participating in the field tests. These might provide some knowledge of why they chose to participate,³ and could provide information about whether the process of participating in the field tests matched expectations and about ways in which it could be improved.

3 Other Items

The interim recommendations are precisely that, and are not meant to define the full scope of attention of the Task Force. Among other items that have been raised and are anticipated to receive further discussion are:

- The potential benefits of more aggressive marketing of PIRLS, PISA and TIMSS, especially if student non-response becomes a problem for PISA. In particular, the Task Force is intrigued with a “Team USA” marketing strategy that would build personal identification of students with international assessments.

¹We acknowledge that this switch raises issues ranging from the inability to use the fall to address non-response problems in the spring and the need to coordinate with states to maintain current lists of superintendents and principals, in case these change from the spring to the fall.

²For example, because of district rules or a district IRB.

³While the Westat study provides some insight into reasons for non-response, little seems to be known about why schools *do* participate.

- The extent to which districts have become or are becoming a major factor in non-response, and what strategies may be effective in addressing this.
- More precise trade-offs between incentives and costs, particularly in regard to school-level participation. For example, evidence that feasible incentives are not effective stems largely from non-responders, an issue that we address from one direction in §2. In another direction, “burden-reducing” rather than financial incentives—for instance, having contractors rather than teachers administer the assessments—merit more detailed consideration.
- The Task Force generally supports most of the approaches to decreasing non-response outlined by RTI, and plans further discussion on these issues.

A Task Force Members

Eva Baker, UCLA
Brian Harris–Kotjein, Office of Management and Budget
Patricia Harvey, St. Paul Public Schools
Lyle Jones, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Jennifer Maddans, National Center for Health Statistics
Ina Mullis, Boston College
Clyde Tucker, Bureau of Labor Statistics
Rodney Watson, Louisiana Department of Education

Alan F. Karr, National Institute of Statistical Sciences (chair)

B Charge

The charge from NCES to the Task Force is to make recommendations for improving participation rates in international assessments, and in particular to suggest new methods beyond the usual.

Formulation of these recommendations will entail clear understanding of existing and potential future resistance to participation in international assessments. To some extent, this may be mainly an issue of assembling and evaluating existing information regarding participation rates of US schools and students in international assessments.

The Task Force will recommend a strategy or combination of strategies:

- That are feasible economically and politically. There is no precise definition of “feasible,” but NCES will provide some guidance. Examples of what is not feasible are \$1 million per school to participate and legislation or regulation making participation mandatory.
- For which there is some basis to expect success at generating acceptable participation rates. Examples include success in other countries or other settings, or some reaction from schools or districts.
- For which psychometric implications are or can be characterized.